Shamanism and modern-day witch hunts in Nepal

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“Prayer wheels near the monkey temple in Nepal”

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Introduction

When coming across the term “witch hunt” most of us almost immediately ponder the large number of persecutions that desolated Europe and the American colonies during the early modern ages. The belief in witchcraft and the practice of witch hunts have consisted a common practice throughout human history and even though it is strongly associated with the western societies it constitutes a universal phenomenon (Jones, 2019), that still survives in many parts of the world, such as, in regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and among indigenous cultures of Asia, South and North America, till this day. The current analysis attempts to shed some light on the phenomenon of modern-day witch hunts in Nepal, while examining its

association with shamanism and Nepali society's cultural and religious background, under the spectrum of human rights.

1. Modern-day witch hunts as a global phenomenon

Historically, labeled as witchcraft was the exercise of alleged supernatural powers, aiming to control events and people, through sorcery or magic. Although it can be defined differently in different historical and cultural contexts, witchcraft bears some common characteristics, especially in the West, such as secret meetings at night, cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, or Satan, and performances of black magic (Russell). Witchcraft, also referred to as magic or sorcery, "encompasses beliefs and behaviors in which the relationship between an act and its effect rests on analogy or a mystical connection rather than empirical or scientific validation. While at its core magic is an idea or belief, it manifests in acts and rituals, texts and spells, and objects such as amulets and talismans" (Moro, 2017: 1). Stereotypical depictions of witchcraft have a long history and have constituted in explaining the element of evil in the world for a number of cultures. The intensity of these beliefs is best depicted through the European witch hunts, which took place from the 14th till the 18th century (Russell).

Witchcraft can be perceived as a broad term that varies culturally and socially. As a result there is difficulty in extracting a sole definition with precision (Russell, 1972). Contemporary notions and belief in witchcraft include natural, religious, moral and other philosophical patterns of thought, combined with a theory of causation, which may give an explanation to situations of misfortune, pain or even death. Moreover, witchcraft constitutes a method of dealing with conflict and difference, usually targeting groups of people who are the most vulnerable to witchcraft accusations, predominantly women (Spence, 2017) and often leading to modern-day witch hunts.

Even though witchcraft can be strongly associated with the female gender, there are plenty of instances in which gender plays no particular role to the phenomenon. In regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, another "vulnerable group" that is often subjected to witchcraft accusations is that of children. When it comes to children the variable of gender subsides and the witchcraft accusations are often attributed to the conditions of extreme poverty or the occurrence of broken families. "Essentially, children who do not bring anything of any value into the household are often accused of witchcraft" (Spence, 2017: 35).

Another instance of people bearing the stigma of witchcraft regardless gender is people with albinism. In Tanzania, people believe in supernatural powers of albinism. When an albino child is born, it is often killed or abandoned by their parents, out of shame and due to the notion that he or she is great misfortune to the family. In some cases, albinos are feared or ridiculed because of their appearance. In extreme cases, they are hunted, dismembered or killed for their body parts, since they are used as traditional "medicine" by the local shamans-"witchdoctors" (Tuchscherer, 2019).

2. Witch hunts in Nepal and relations to shamanism

Nepal is a society with a complex multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious background. At present, there are more than one hundred and twenty ethnic groups, speaking over a hundred languages. It's noteworthy that, although there is such vast cultural and religious variety within the Nepali society, believing in witchcraft is universal (Adinkrah & Adhikari, 2014). "A large proportion of Nepali population hold deeply-rooted, socially and culturally constructed beliefs in witchcraft, they also often carry out or undergo superstitious practices, rituals and follow related traditions". In general, beliefs in witchcraft in Nepal are not essentially associated with or dependent on people's religion, even though Hindus appear to be a

somewhat more prone to witchcraft beliefs and practices (Grigaitė, 2018: 10).

Witchcraft in Nepal is considered to be a common practice by people who possess evil and calamitous supernatural powers, namely witches and wizards. The powers they supposedly possess enable them to engage in wicked acts such as causing earthquakes, droughts and floods or inflicting diseases and other health problems on humans and animals. They are also considered guilty of causing epidemics, deaths, ruining crops and more (Grigaitė, 2018). According to Adinkrah and Adhikari, in the majority of cases the people who are accused of witchcraft in Nepal are women, while men are only accused of witchcraft occasionally (Adinkrah & Adhikari, 2014).

Shamanism is strongly intertwined with the beliefs in witchcraft in Nepal and it is still widely practiced, even though most ethnic groups of Nepal have adopted forms of either Hinduism or Buddhism (Reed, 2002). Shamanism usually describes a group of beliefs and ritual practices, which are based on the belief that there can be a direct relationship between a person and divinities or spirits. This relationship is mainly effected by a religious expert, known as shaman, through altered states of consciousness, which are also known as trances (Riboli, 2000). According to Reinhard, a shaman is a person who a can enter into an alternate psychic state at will, in which either his soul embarks on a journey to the spirit world or his body becomes possessed by a spirit, in order to make contact with the spirit world on behalf of members of his community (Reinhard, 1976, according to Busick, 1978). “The shaman is usually a diviner, therapist and psychopomp and it is he who accompanies dead souls to the world of their forefathers” (Riboli, 2000: 7). As a result, in cases of suspected witchcraft and the involvement of non-human entities in cases of illness or other misfortunes the shaman is the one who will perform a complex ritual of appeasement, exorcism or the combination of both, in order to deal with the source of the

problem (Torri, 2020). When it comes to a patient's healing, shamans usually perform in the patient's home after being invited by a family member and even make deals with witches when they are the reason why a person falls sick in order to obtain all the necessary information for the sick person's healing (Armbrecht, 2008).

Witchcraft beliefs and practices are more common within rural regions of Nepal, even though urban areas are not completely free of them either (Grigaitė, 2018). It is also widely believed that the majority of witches in Nepal are women, unlike shamans who are predominantly men (Armbrecht, 2008), and in many cases they contribute greatly in witch hunts, human rights abuses and violence against women who are labeled as witches. Nepal's shamans, also known as "Jhakri", are highly respected and trusted members of the Nepali society, as they are the traditional healers. As a result, shamans constitute a contributory factor in promoting belief in witchcraft, which can consequently result in witchcraft accusations and eventually modern-day witch hunts (Grigaitė, 2018: 14).

Various studies provide strong evidence that most likely to be accused of witchcraft in Nepal are women, and mainly those of older age, those who are single or widowed, lacking in education and living in poverty (Adinkrah & Adhikari, 2014). "There is evidence that in some communities … in Nepal, witchcraft-related violence is a form of gender injustice used as a ploy by aggrieved men and their agents to deprive widows and other women of their succession rights and inheritance rights to property" (Grigaitė, 2018: 17). In many cases the accusations lead to brutal witch hunts and incidents of extreme violence, such as physical and mental torture towards the accused ones. Women accused of witchcraft, often end up "being ostracized from the society, battered, fed human excreta, hit with hot spoons in different parts of the body, forced to touch red hot irons, forced to breathe in chili smoke, especially by Jhankris (shamans), perforated in private organs, offended publicly", all of which contribute to their confessions

(Paudel, 2011). Representative of such brutality is the death of a 40-year-old widow and mother of two in Chitwan District, who was burnt alive by her family on February 18th 2012, after being accused by a local shaman and her family members of using witchcraft to make another family member sick (Fernandez & Thapa, 2012). According to the local police report, she was beaten with sticks and rocks be for being set afire, before the eyes of her 9-year-old daughter (Shrestha, 2012). A month later, another widow was brutally battered and blinded by her siblings after also being accused of practicing witchcraft, in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu (Fernandez & Thapa, 2012).

Such traumatic experiences have deep impact not only on the lives of the women who are accused of performing witchcraft but also on their families, who are often tortured and compelled to leave their homes or overall the areas in which they have been residing for many years. Most commonly, the victims of the accusation are rejected by their family, while the stigma of "being a witch" and the violence they have been subjected to leads them to mental or physical disorders, and in some cases they even commit suicide in fear of being accused and tortured again (Paudel, 2011).

3. The role of human rights in tackling the problem

Witchcraft accusations were officially banned in Nepal by the Anti-Witch Hunting Law, which criminalizes witchcraft accusation and persecution, as well as all related human rights violations. The law was implemented in 2014 and it provides a fine up to 100,000 rupees, along with a jail sentence of up to 10 years for the perpetrators (The Himalayan Times, 2015). However, the challenges remain. According to the Human Right Watch World Report 2020, the implementation of Anti-Witch Hunt Act still remains poor and there is significant lack of political will and legislative framework to combat such superstitious beliefs engraved in Nepali society (HRW,

2020). Another important challenge is people's lack of information regarding the new law and their rights, especially for those who reside in Nepal's remote areas, but even for those who are aware, they usually have to face the reluctance or indifference of local authorities on the matter (Grigaitė, 2018).

Furthermore, a number of NGOs contribute greatly in raising awareness. Among many, National Women's Commission which was established on 7th March 2002 and aims to reinforce gender equality and advance women's development and empowerment, has been involved in campaigning to protect women from witchcraft accusations and violence related to it. Another striking example is the Forum for Protection of People's Rights, Nepal (PPR Nepal). It was established in 2002 as well, and it advocates and works in the area of human rights and access to justice, with essential contribution in raising consciousness and campaigning on violence against women based on witchcraft accusations (WHRIN, 2014).

At this point, it is of great significance to mention that witchcraft accusations and all the related human rights infringements constitute a global phenomenon but has barely been featured on the international scene. "Despite the conceptualization of witchcraft accusations as human rights violations, the issue has received relatively little attention within human rights discourse from the UN, academia or civil society". Some awareness has been raised mostly regarding child witchcraft accusations in Africa, by NGOs and within the UN system by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (European Parliament, 2013: 6). As Philip Alston states, violence and human rights abuse due to witchcraft accusations hasn't been addressed systematically in the context of human rights. A bright exception is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which acknowledges in its guidelines that women are labelled as witches in some communities and burned or stoned to death due to culturally condoned beliefs and practices (Alston, 2009).

The very first systematic and in-depth discussion on witchcraft and human rights at an international level was conducted by the United Nations (UN), during the "Workshop on Witchcraft and Human Rights" on the 21st and 22nd September 2017, which brought together UN Experts, academics and members of civil society to discuss about violence associated with witchcraft beliefs and practices and particularly vulnerable groups (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). Nonetheless, currently there is no normative framework or formal mechanism to conceptualize, record, monitor or respond to human right violations regarding witchcraft accusations (WHRIN, 2014).

Conclusion

Nepal is but one of many regions of the world where people and especially women are victimized, due to cultural and religious beliefs regarding witchcraft accusations. Even though significant attempts on combatting the phenomenon of modern-day witch hunts have been recorded, the formal responses to it on both national and international level have been rather weak and limited. It is apparent that there is great need of an organized international attempt to inform individuals and raise awareness over the problem, in addition to the creation of an international legislative framework in order to record and effectively protect individuals from such violations of human rights.

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